

What's Next for AAUW?

Attendees at the convention in Phoenix gave AAUW's new boards the green light to make changes to revitalize and reposition AAUW. The boards are taking the needed steps to ensure that every action taken on behalf of AAUW furthers our mission. What will you do to bring the focus on mission to every part of the organization you touch?



By Sherry Schiller

Have you ever been lost and not known it? We can miss a turn, and if we're well fortified with fuel, food, and—in my case—good music, we may not notice for some time that we're off course. By the time we realize we're having a great time but not heading to our destination, we can be miles and hours out of the way.

Much of my work involves helping leaders get their organizations back on track once they've recognized they aren't heading where they want to go. Change and uncertain futures breed anxiety, so I am often asked what the future holds for an organization. I have learned that one answer is always correct. The answer to, "What's next?" is, "It all depends." The follow-up question, "On what does it depend?" is by far the more interesting and important one. Let me share the factors on which I believe AAUW's future rests.

For close to two decades, AAUW has been lost. The journey was for the most

part fun, and there was adequate fuel, so it was a while before leaders noticed they were not on a clear, strategic course. In the meantime, the world had changed and AAUW had not. AAUW leaders were no longer sure they remembered and agreed

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on their desired destination. When they launched a strategic initiative in 2005 to ask members and external stakeholders for their views, they already knew what they would hear: AAUW lacked a focused, relevant vision and specific, actionable, long-term goals to realize it.

The more than 11,000 respondents who participated in the first phase of the strategic initiative reported that AAUW had failed to demonstrate which societal needs it serves, how it serves them, and how to fuel its financial engine in doing so. Instead, AAUW had focused on structural and process issues, ossifying through increasing levels of bureaucracy and blind obedience to obsolete bylaws and antiquated practices. Programming, member services, advocacy, research, development, and communications were being accomplished by a shrinking pool of overwhelmed staff and a handful of well-meaning but poorly deployed volunteers, with rapidly shrinking revenues on which to draw.

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two ideals. It had built a proud but potentially lethal tradition of being flexible where it should be firm and of being rigid where it needed to be supple.

As members, we need to understand that we should never compromise our values, vision, and mission; these should be nonnegotiable. The rules, structures, bylaws, committees, and programs—how we achieve our mission—are only the means to that goal. If one way doesn't work, let's try another. Or go around it. But let's not value means over ends or even worship means as the end itself.

At a strategic planning workshop held at this year's convention in Phoenix, AAUW leaders shared with participants three possible scenarios for AAUW's future. This discussion created something of a stir. Scenario one was described as Certain Death, the scenario most likely to occur if the bylaws proposals under consideration at the convention didn't pass. As members know by now, the bylaws proposals did indeed pass, by a remarkable and heartfelt unanimous vote. And so, for now, AAUW has dodged the Certain Death bullet.

The second possible future for AAUW was labeled Lingering Death. In this scenario, AAUW passes its bylaws proposals at convention but does not dramatically and immediately change its institutional behavior. In spite of members' sending leaders a clear "full steam ahead" message with their vote at convention, leaders fail to take the focused, courageous steps needed for AAUW to thrive. Although dodging immediate death, the organization only buys itself some time to die a slower death. The end of AAUW is dragged out by a few years at best, and is perhaps ultimately more painful than Certain Death, but equally certain. So, the answer to the question, "What's next for AAUW?" in the Lingering Death scenario is just as clear as in the Certain Death scenario—only the terms and timeline remain to be discovered.

In scenario three, dubbed Phoenix Rising, AAUW leaders accept the positive bylaws vote at convention as a clear man-

date from members to act boldly and decisively to revitalize the organization. They immediately address the key challenges facing AAUW with creativity, collaboration, and grit. Leaders and members alike quickly and completely embrace a shared, relevant societal purpose for AAUW. They demonstrate discipline and courage beyond anything we have known in recent years. Working together, they shift AAUW from a hierarchical, input-based, anecdotally driven organization to a more results-based, mission-driven one. They build a culture of excellence to foster innovation, cooperation, trust, and continuous improvement.


Although many would say Lingering Death may be the most likely future for AAUW, Phoenix Rising is obviously our desired future. In fact, Phoenix Rising holds the only viable path forward. If Phoenix Rising is our preferable but not our probable scenario, then it will not occur without dramatic and immediate

changes in much of what we've been doing and how we've been doing it.

Phoenix Rising is the only scenario that has any interesting answers to the question, "What's next?" To make this vision a reality, AAUW needs three things: a focused vision, a focused organization, and focused action.

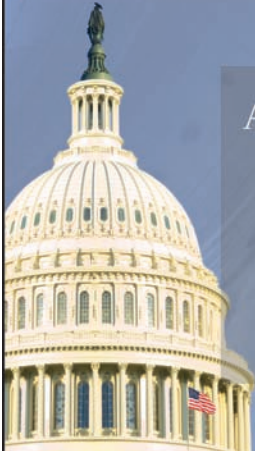
Focusing Our Vision

In the years before World War II, the great thinker Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote, "There is nothing so powerful in this world, not existent facts nor inveterate history, nor the selfishness of ruling classes, nor the reluctance of apathetic governments, nothing so powerful as an idea whose time has dawned. We are standing at a crossroads. Let's choose to be instruments of the great ideas of our time. We have a unique opportunity and, indeed, a responsibility to use our talents, resources, and leadership wisely to be navigators who have a vision for the future."



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American University salutes AAUW for its Legacy of Leadership



American University thanks the AAUW for more than 125 years of dedication and work to the advancement of women's rights, legislation, and advocacy in support of equity in higher education.

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Scenarios one and two demonstrate the continuation of a lack of focused vision. The only possible rebirth for AAUW, Phoenix Rising, depends on our being instruments of great ideas in the air. AAUW can become a relevant, healthy organization again only if we focus on a unified vision that shapes every dimension of our organization from this point forward.

To achieve a focused vision to propel AAUW, like the phoenix rising from the ashes, we need to create and communicate a clear, compelling, and consistent story about how AAUW improves the lives of women and girls. It must be recognized as relevant by more than those whose lives it currently touches. By tapping into a perceived societal need, we will demonstrate relevance and attract new members, partners, supporters, and media. Our story needs to play to our strengths, and it must be consistent with our essence, our DNA, AAUW's truest calling. And we must live our future focus story every second—through every action, large or small, national or local, programmatic or procedural.

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Focusing Our Organization

The first thing we need to do to focus our organization is for every one of us, members and leaders alike, to “walk our talk.” There is nothing more disabling for an organization than hearing messages communicated by leaders whose actions do not appear consistent with their espoused goals and values. AAUW can never achieve Phoenix Rising if its members and leaders do not practice treating one another, staff, and others with respect.

We need to ask for and listen to feedback to know whether we are being perceived as walking our talk. We need to create an organization that demonstrates its belief that diversity is a strength.

Next, we need to throw out the rule-books—no more business as usual. These are not normal times for AAUW, and we cannot keep going back to the rules and the bylaws to figure out what we can and cannot do. Desperate times call for desperate actions. Let's not be held hostage by a set of rules that were not made for our current reality.

Leaders need to focus on the big picture and be strategic about how they expend their time, energy, and organizational resources. The human mind is more comfortable dealing with the concrete than the abstract, more comfortable with being right than being curious. Without discipline, we will revert to the known and the details, missing the big picture altogether. AAUW leaders must work hard to avoid a common trap in response to the overwhelming complexities of the organization's condition by retreating into the comfort of details, the concrete, the past, and creating more structures and procedures in order to feel as if progress is being made. When this happens, it is as if we have gotten our zoom lens stuck on micro focus, when what we need is to be able to zoom out and ask, “Why are we doing this? What is our desired result? How will this fulfill our mission?”

All branch activities need to be consistent with and support AAUW's mission. Advocacy, education, and even research can effectively occur at the individual and branch levels. We miss achieving our fullest impact, though, if we fail to dream big and create the critical mass necessary to bring about lasting societal changes. AAUW's national organization serves our collective vision and gives us the unified voice, the strength, the talent, and the skills to make a difference at the national level.

My most important recommendation for focusing our organization is to commit to shifting our culture—a change without which we can never achieve the Phoenix Rising scenario. We need to live our stated values of equity, respect, and

dignity for everyone. We must be open to change, so people can focus on what's important and feel safe offering constructive feedback on how to strengthen the team's performance. And when people do witness unconstructive behaviors—such as distrust, finger pointing, bullying, and nitpicking—they must have the courage to say, “That's not okay anymore.”

In today's world, there are many activities, organizations, and causes competing for a potential member's time, energy, and resources. We will never be able to attract and retain new members, partners, and supporters if, upon investigating, they find our actions inconsistent with our story.

Let's be bold and decisive rather than cautious and safe—which is truly an unsafe position in a rapidly changing and uncertain environment.

Focusing Our Actions

There are three postures we need to adopt, personally and organizationally, to better focus our actions. The first is to adopt a positive posture. We create our own reality by what we expect to happen. We *real-ize* what we expect, so why not choose to have a posture toward the positive? Why not make it an intentional choice to look for the good, to see what can work, to believe we can make a difference, and to think we have more to gain than to lose by acting on these positive beliefs?

The second posture we need is toward strategic action—to stop studying and start doing. But we don't need activity for the sake of activity; our actions must lead directly and visibly to results to realize our mission. One of my personal goals is to make smarter and smarter mistakes. I don't want to keep making the same mistakes over and over; I want to learn from my mistakes. A life without mistakes is a life without risk, without opportunity, without advancement, without fun. This is

true for organizations as well as for individuals. Let's be bold and decisive rather than cautious and safe—which is truly an unsafe position in a rapidly changing and uncertain environment.

Yes, our actions sometimes have unintended consequences, but this cannot be an excuse for inaction. Inaction is the riskiest posture of all. To not act is to lose energy and momentum. It is to forgo all valuable information, skill, and friends that can be acquired along the journey. It is to lose faith in yourself, to lose position in the marketplace of great ideas, and to lose the respect of those courageous enough to go ahead without you. A posture of action springs from the belief that you can and must make a positive difference, and this is an essential belief upon which AAUW was founded and upon which it has grown.

Experts on change call this belief—the idea you can make a difference—an internal locus of control. It is the most essential element for any kind of change. If we believe that the influences in our lives or our organization are primarily outside of our control, we are said to have an external locus of control, which is often played out by adopting a victim or martyr role. We can never get to our desired Phoenix Rising scenario this way. Only by believing that AAUW's future is in our hands can we make the improbable or the impossible happen.

The final stance we need is one of service. Let's ask not what our association can do for us but what we can do for its mission. We've got to stop measuring the value of our membership by how many benefits we receive for our dues and start viewing our contributions as a way to advance a cause in which we believe. When I contribute to the Sierra Club or the American Cancer Society, I don't expect a commensurate benefit to me personally. I view my contribution as a donation to further its programs, which further a mission in which I believe. If I

receive a newsletter or magazine from them, I view it not as a right I deserve but as an extra opportunity to learn more about their work on my behalf. Why should AAUW, also an advocacy organization, be so different?

This need to shift perspectives is a huge challenge to the new leadership of AAUW as well as to its members. The new boards met together following the Phoenix convention and agreed to focus on the steps needed in the coming year to transform the organization. With the support of all of us members, they must focus their vision for AAUW, their organizational structures and practices, and their actions. And, like the rest of us, they should continually be asking, "What are the great ideas in the air that we can serve?" Whatever our roles and responsibilities are in AAUW, let's make our answer to the question, "What's next?" be, "It all depends on me."

Let's ask not what our association can do for us but what we can do for its mission.

Catherine the Great is quoted as having said, "A great wind of change is blowing, and it gives you either imagination or a headache." We need to face those winds of change and let them fuel our imagination, our creativity, and our commitment. Oprah Winfrey put it this way: "My philosophy is not only that you are responsible for your life, but doing the best at this moment puts you in the very best place for the next moment." This is all any of us can expect of ourselves—knowing that we are doing the best we can in this moment. It's also what we should expect of the organizations that advance issues about which we care. May we have the courage,

strength, and wisdom to help AAUW work with greater purpose and harmony.

What's next? If we want AAUW to rise like the phoenix, the answer is simple—and also the greatest challenge we will ever face as an organization. We should each feel that the answer depends on us. We must work together to do the right things in the right ways, in as focused and cooperative a spirit as we can muster. I believe we are up for the challenge. We must be, because we all know that equity is still an issue. As Helen Keller said, "One can never consent to creep when one feels an impulse to soar." I say, "Let's rise and soar like the phoenix!" ☐

What can you do to help AAUW?

- Visit the Two-Minute Activist on the AAUW website (www.aauw.org), find an issue you support, and make your voice heard in Congress.
- Host a candidates' debate or meet-the-candidates event in your community.
- Plan a series of interactive, mission-driven meetings, and then invite friends who may be interested in joining AAUW.
- Look for partnership opportunities with other organizations in your community that share AAUW's values and goals. Work together in support of Equal Pay Day, International Women's Day, or other mission-focused programs and activities.
- Invite a Legal Advocacy Fund plaintiff to speak at your branch meeting.
- Get involved with the National Girls Collaborative Project to promote science, technology, engineering, and math opportunities for girls in your community.
- Start a wage club, launch a Financial Independence for Girls program, or host a lecture series on women's economic security.
- Visit AAUW's new website to find out more about mission-related ideas that you can implement or to get the facts about AAUW's latest research.

Sherry Schiller, Ph.D., is president of the Schiller Center and an expert on change who coaches leaders to envision and realize the best future for their organizations. She has been AAUW's strategic process consultant this year. This article is adapted from her plenary session on change, which she presented at the 2007 AAUW National Convention in Phoenix, Arizona. A video of the plenary session is available, in DVD and VHS formats, from ShopAAUW at www.aauw.org.